The Theme of the Voyage and the Messenger*

The Transition from Theoretical Teaching to Real Event of the Soul

Islamic gnosticism's metaphor of choice for the spiritual adventure is that of the voyage. Most often, it includes the figure of a messenger, beckoning one towards the undertaking. The classic illustration of it is the heavenly ascension of the Prophet Mohammed (the *Mi'raj, Qur'an* 17:1). During this night of ecstasy, he was summoned by the angel Gabriel, who guided him on a visit to the seven heavens, and the prophets who dwell therein.

Mi'raj literature is considerable, with multiple orchestrations and variations upon this theme. Some of them bring together a variety of folkloric traditions. Others are based entirely upon all the resources of speculative mysticism and the high philosophical sciences, for the heavenly ascension of the Prophet has been the prototype which all of these mystics have tried to relive for themselves. Considered in this sense, this theme illustrates something characteristic of Islamic spirituality: whatever the conflicts that may have existed between prophetic religion and mysticism, the former clears the way for the latter, which then brings about the fulfillment of prophetic religion.

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This same theme gives us a hint of the hidden reason as to why the adventure of philosophy also represents, and presents, itself in the form of a voyage. Just as the experience lived by the Prophet is the prototype which compels each Islamic mystic to strive to relive it, it is also true that, inasmuch as the philosophical search is destined to culminate in mystical experience, the philosopher's vocation is therefore a preparation for that experience. To the extent that this holds true, there is something in common between the vocation of the philosopher and that of the prophet. This is one of the central concerns of the *Ishraqiyun,* those Persian Platonists whose leading figure in the twelfth century was Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi. Along with his philosophical writings, he left a whole series of mystical reports in which the theme of the voyage and the messenger has a central place.

This twofold aspect of his work illustrates the profundity of the author's thought. He maintained that without a solid philosophical foundation, the mystical experience is in danger of going astray and degenerating; yet it is equally true that a philosophical search which does not arrive at mystical experience, at personal spiritual realization, is a vanity and a waste of time.[1] This is why it is always best to read the term "gnosis" *('irfan, ma'arifat)* in its original, technical sense of a knowledge which never remains at a theoretical level: it is a salvational knowledge, because it engages the spiritual, inner human being in the way of deliverance and regeneration. This is the meaning of the voyage to which we are invited by the various masters I have discussed previously. This voyage transmutes philosophy into a divine wisdom — etymologically, into a *theosophia.*

[1] Cf. *En Islam iranien...*, the whole of volume II.

We find a testimony of this sense of the voyage in the vast work of a seventeenth-century Persian Platonist, Mullah Sadra Shirazi. One of the greatest names in Iranian philosophy, he has remained the guiding thinker in Iranian spirituality for generation after generation. Since the idea of a fourfold voyage is a tradition among Islamic mystics, Mullah Sadra takes it as the pattern upon which he structures his great summary of theosophical philosophy, entitled "High Wisdom Concerning the Four Spiritual Voyages."[2]

The first voyage is from the world of creatures towards Divine Being. In this, the philosopher grapples with general problems of physics, matter and form, and of substance and accident. At its culmination, the philosopher-pilgrim experiences fulfillment at the supersensible level of divine realities.

The second voyage moves from God, towards God, by means of God: one travels with God and in God. Here, the pilgrim never leaves the metaphysical plane; he is initiated into the *ilahiyat,* or divine sciences (the *divinalia*), and into the questions of the Divine Essence, and the divine names and attributes.

The third voyage begins from God to a re-entry into the creaturely world, but by means of God and in God. In effect, this is an intellectual reversal of the first voyage, involving an initiation into the Hierarchy of Intelligences and the supersensible universes (the *malakut* and the *jabarut*).

Finally, the fourth voyage begins in the creaturely world, and travels in this same world, accomplished this time by God or with God. Essentially, it is an initiation into knowledge of the soul, into self-knowledge. This is, par excellence, what these

[2] Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî, *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques,* edited and translated by H. Corbin, part of the collection *Islam spirituel,* Verdier, 1988, p. 31. Also, see *En Islam iranien...* vol. IV.

philosophers call "Eastern" knowledge *('ilm ishraqi)* in the metaphysical sense of that adjective. It is an illustration of the maxim, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord." It is an initiation into the esoteric *tawhid,* the theomonism which maintains that only God truly is; and it is an initiation into the various symbols pertaining to the posthumous evolution of human beings.

These are the broad outlines of how the idea of the voyage is predominant in the philosophical adventure, according to one of the greatest philosophers of Shiite Iran. But well before him, in the fourteenth century, Haydar Amoli, another great Iranian theosophical mystic, gave the following account of the fourfold voyage.[3]

The first voyage moves towards God through the steps and dwellings of the soul, until it arrives at the limit of the manifest horizon *(al-ufq al-mubin),* which is the limit of the "station of the heart" *(maqam al-qalb),* at the threshold of the theophany of the divine names. The goal of this first voyage is the rending of the veils of plurality which hide the face of Unity.

The second voyage progresses from the manifest horizon towards the supreme horizon *(al-ufq al-a'la),* which is the metaphysical level of the First Intelligence (first in the series of the Unities), that of Pluralizable Unity. During the progress of this second voyage, which moves towards God, the mystic gains access to the secret of the theophanies of the divine names. These are the theophanies through which the Divine Abyss, the *Deus absconditus,* manifests and creates itself as revealed God in the plurality of religious beliefs. This means that between each divine name and the human being through whom and by

[3] Haydar Amolî, *Le Texte des textes,* edited and presented by H. Corbin and O. Yahia, "Bibliothèque iranienne," 22, p. 268, § 600.

whom this name is revealed, there is a bond of reciprocal interdependence, analogous to that between a knight and his lord. The complementary inverse of the first voyage, this one rends the veil of Unity which hides the multitude of aspects related to esoteric knowledge.

The third voyage leads to a vision of all the divine names as forming a unitary totality *('ayn al-jam');* we might say a "unitude," or Unity *(ahadiya)* which is followed by no other unity, because it is the total unity of the totality. This voyage involves the falling away of the obstacles *(taqyidat)* which determine the pairs of opposites.

The fourth voyage then completes and reverses the third one. It consists of a return from the One to the Many, from God to creature, so as to attain the station of perfect equilibrium of the Balance. The multiplicity which was annihilated during the third voyage reappears, and finds its proper role here as the meta-existence *(baqa')* which follows annihilation *(fana).* Beings again appear in their plurality, but this plurality no longer has the same meaning as it did for naive consciousness prior to the undertaking of the fourfold voyage. From here on, there is a simultaneity, a *coincidentia,* between unitary fusion and separative distinction: between the extinction of God in the creature, and the extinction of the creature in God. This enables the inner eye of vision to contemplate Unity within the multitude of forms, and to contemplate the multitude of forms within the very vision of Unity.

These analyses, for which we are indebted to these two great masters of Islamic Iranian thought, would seem to give us an idea of what they mean by "the spiritual voyage," and why both the philosophical and the mystical quest are presented by them in the form of a voyage. It is essentially equivalent to the quest of the Grail in our Western traditions. Thus every spiri-

tual person, every mystic, is always seen as a *salik,* a voyager or pilgrim *(homo viator).* To be a philosopher is to take to the road, never settling down in some place of satisfaction with a theory of the world, not even a place of reformation, nor of some illusory transformation of the conditions of this world. It aims for self-transformation, for the inner metamorphosis which is implied by the notion of a new, or spiritual rebirth *(wiladat ruhaniya).* The adventure of the mystical philosopher is essentially seen as a voyage which progresses towards the Light *(sayr).*

We have just considered the four stages as shown by two Iranian masters. The fourth one is without limit. There is a famous inspired saying *(hadith qudsi)* which applies to this: the divine Being, speaking of the devotee who has reached this stage, declares: "Henceforth I am the looking through which he sees, the listening through which he hears, the hand with which he touches, the foot with which he walks, ...etc." In other words, it is the stage where the Divine Subject takes the place of the human subject, for in truth and in essence, God can never be an *object* which one ponders, whether as a historian, an ethnologist, or even as a theologian.

Now, it is this metamorphosis of the knowing Subject which is the real voyage for these gnostic Islamic philosophers. It means that one must bridge the entire gulf which separates the certainty of theoretical knowledge *(ilm al-yaqin)* and the certainty of personally lived and realized gnostic knowledge *(haqq al-yaqin).* As long as there is an *I,* withdrawn into its egoity, confronting an abstract divinity which is withdrawn into its unknowability, there can be no satisfactory knowledge of such an object, regardless of the divine names and attributes associated with it. The only way knowledge can satisfy the demands of divinity is when the object is no longer regarded dialectical-

ly, but revealed to the knowing subject by the subject itself. This very epiphany is itself a replacement of the primitive subject by the absolute Subject, which the former had been trying to comprehend as if it were an object of its knowledge. God cannot be known by *another,* as if God were an object which is *other* than oneself; God can only be known by God as *absolute* Subject, which is *absous** of all illusory objectivity. It is this divine Subject which is in fact the active Subject of all knowledge of God; it is God himself who is thinking himself through the thought which the enlightened human intellect has of him. This the meaning of the *hadith qudsi* which we just cited.

Though they were not aware of it, by taking this *hadith* as their leitmotif, these gnostics show a remarkable affinity with the Western tradition of speculative mysticism which extends from Meister Eckhart down to the "speculative theologians," those contemporaries of Hegel and Schelling, who have unfortunately been totally forgotten by our own era.[4] The authentic meaning of "speculative" is lost unless we bear in mind its etymological origin: *speculum* = mirror. The intelligence of speculative theology is in its functioning as a mirror which *reflects* God, a mirror in which God is revealed. In the words of Franz von Baader, *"Spekulieren heisst spiegeln."* ("To speculate is to reflect.")

Now, all of this has its perfect counterpart in Islamic theosophy. We find it at the culmination of the great mystical epic, *The Birds,* by Fariduddin 'Attar. The mirror is the inner human being, to whom, by whom, and for whom the theophany *(tajalli, zohur)* is produced, and who is the place and form *(mazhar)*

* [Latin *absous* = rid of, free of]

[4] Cf. H. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique,* Paris Gallimard, coll. "Folio-Essais," 1986, pp. 352 sqq.

which it takes. The speculative state, in its mystical sense, is when the human being has become a mirror in which the *gesta divina* are accomplished. However, because this mirror is the place of the soul contemplating itself in contemplation, it is also true to say that the mirror is itself the divine Being.

It is precisely this state which is the goal of the inner, spiritual voyage. The voyage begins at the point when the teaching becomes an event of the soul. Likewise, the voyage is a sign of transition, when the teaching undergoes a metamorphosis, fulfilling itself in events which are personally lived. It is at this decisive juncture that the Messenger's role intervenes. The content of the message is the teaching itself, and it is this very teaching which becomes the messenger at the moment when personal consciousness obeys the imperative to embark upon the voyage. But this is also the moment when the spiritual energy latent in this imperative allows the apparition of the Messenger to be "embodied" in the personal form of the Guide or the Angel, at the horizon of inner vision.

As examples of this, we shall now consider visionary accounts from three of Iran's great spiritual masters: Avicenna, 'Attar, and Suhrawardi.

The Theme of the Spiritual Voyage in Avicenna and 'Attar

Partially translated into Latin, the work of the great Iranian philosopher Avicenna (died 1037) had a profound influence on our medieval Scholastics. Although later overwhelmed by the Averroist wave elsewhere, this influence quietly continued among Rhineland mystics, such as Keitrich von Freiberg in the fourteenth century. In Iran, Avicenna's influence held firm through the centuries down to our time, most often intermin-

gled with that of Suhrawardi. In contrast with Avicenna's prolific theoretical writings, a cycle of three mystical recitals stands out, writings which had to wait long for a Western appreciation of their profound significance. My own effort appeared some twenty years ago, on the occasion of the millennial celebration of his birth.[5]

Because all too few philosophers have taken an interest in this field, the meager interpretations of this aspect of Avicenna found only bland allegories in his work, showing a failure to clearly distinguish allegory from symbol. But the symbols of his narratives are really telling us of a metaphysical "East" which cannot be found on any geographical map. Again, this is the "voyage to the East" which is the goal of the philosopher-mystic. These narratives suggest that it is ultimately in terms of this "Eastern philosophy" that Avicenna confided the secret of his personal philosophy, of which only fragments remain to us. We know that Suhrawardi felt that Avicenna had not been able to complete his project of "Eastern philosophy" in its metaphysical aspect, and that its realization had to await Suhrawardi's own resurrection of ancient Persian theosophy. Yet the two masters agree on the metaphysical meaning of the "Voyage to the East."

Both ontologically and etymologically, the idea of this voyage presupposes an *orientation.* To orient oneself is to discover *where* one is. This orientation thus shows us the context in which it makes sense to speak of an *Orient* and an *Occident* of the cosmos. At this point, the question "Where?" may arise — but the only possible answer to this question must itself include a *sense* which situates this human existence, and by the same

[5] *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire,* "Bibliothèque iranienne," 4 and 5, 1979 edition, Paris, Berg International.

token reveals *who* the questioner is. The answer thus also orients the soul to its status as *stranger* (the "allogenic" theme in ancient gnosticism). To *orient* oneself is to turn towards the *Orient,* to come out of the cosmic crypt, so as to rediscover the absolute "Orient" which is one's true and original home. It is this orientation which was given in the ancient Orphic mysteries, as well as in the poem of Parmenides, where the poet is guided by the daughters of the Sun upon a "voyage towards the Light," a voyage towards the East.[6]

From here on, the cosmos is no longer an external object, the distant model for theoretical descriptions and inventories. It is lived as a series of steps in a more or less dangerous *exodus* to which one is committed. Descriptions of it are no longer satisfactory; someone, the Messenger or Guide, will show you how to get through it, because you are a *stranger* here. This exodus is neither an allegory nor an external adventure. It is the inner story of the soul, whose events can only be expressed in symbols, and therefore take the form of a parable. It is thus a true story, for the parable is perhaps the only kind of story which can be true. In order for cosmic, anthropological, or other kinds of teachings to pass from the theoretical level to that of events of the soul, their contents must be apprehended by a faculty which is neither of sense-perception nor of abstract intelligibility. This organ is the active Imagination, which transmutes all the data of cosmology, cosmogenesis, physics and anthropology, into symbols. We shall return to this subject at the conclusion of this essay.

Now, the three Avicennian narratives offer an excellent example of this passage. The first is *The Story of Hayy ibn*

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 181 sqq.; 2nd edition, p. 171.

Yaqzan. It is essentially an initiation into the "East," the world of archangelic Forms of Light which is "located" opposite the "West" of the terrestrial realm, and the "extreme West" of pure Matter. He describes in advance the stages of the voyage, a vast cosmography whose details are progressively transmuted into symbols. He invites the adept to take the Angel as companion, so as to travel through this forest of symbols towards the East. We are left in suspense as to the response to this invitation.

It is only after the pathos of the opening prelude of the second recital, *The Story of the Bird,* that the response to this invitation is given. A captive stranger, the soul is revealed to itself. In an ecstatic ascension of the mind, it crosses the valleys and ranges of the cosmic mountain of *Qaf.* It was this story of Avicenna's which Fariduddin 'Attar orchestrated so magnificently into the mystical epic entitled *The Language of the Birds.*

The third Avicennian narrative is *The Story of Solomon and Absal,* which survives only in the form of a rather sketchy résumé given by Nasruddin Tusi (died 1274) in his commentary on Avicenna's *Book of Precepts (Isharat).* The figure of Absal represents "your station in mystical gnosis," and his mystical death anticipates the decisive ecstasy of the irreversible Voyage to the East.

It is the first two accounts which directly concern us here. The first one is an invitation to the Voyage to the East, with the description of its anticipated steps. The second is the encounter with the dangers of these steps, and the final triumph over them. Unfortunately, there is no space here for a detailed analysis of these, so we shall limit ourselves to some allusive references.

As for *The Story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan,* we should first point out the meaning of the proper name of the title. *Hayy* means the Living, and *Yaqzan* means the Vigilant (csf. Greek *Egre-*

goros), so that the figure Hayy ibn Yaqzan is the Living, son of the Vigilant. This is the name of the Angel who will act as both Messenger and Guide, as well as interpreter, in the course of the story. He plays the same role as the archangel Gabriel in the visions of Daniel, and as Raphael or Michael in those of Enoch, or as Uriel in the Fourth Book of Esdras. In the Avicennian narrative, he is the very same archangel Gabriel who bestowed revelations upon the whole succession of prophets which leads up to Mohammed. It is he who is identified as the Holy Spirit in the Qur'an, which philosophers identified with the agency of Intelligence. The Messenger and Guide of Avicenna's narratives, as in those of Suhrawardi, is both the Angel of Knowledge and of Revelation. The juxtaposition of these two roles is of crucial importance, because it pre-emptively avoids any dilemma which would oppose knowledge and belief. This juxtaposition is the very sign of *gnosis*.

Of course this Angel can only manifest in certain privileged moments when the inner person is recollected in the center of his personal Estate, in the castle of his soul. In the opening to his story, Avicenna express it in this way: "There were certain times when I had taken up residence in my personal Estate, and happened to go out with companions to agreeable places which are found in the environs of this same Estate. Then, as we went to and fro, walking in circles, there appeared a Sage in the distance. His person was resplendent with the beauty of divine glory...." After an exchange of salutations and opening words, the visionary asks the Sage his name and his origin. His name we have already discussed. As to his origin, the Angel reveals to the visionary that he comes from the "sacrosanct Temple" *(al-Beyt al-muqaddas)*, otherwise known as the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Then ensues a long initiatory dialogue with the Angel. Let us

consider the beginning of it, which is characteristic. The first science of this initiation is none other than that of physiognomy. Certainly this word must be understood in the broadest sense, broad enough so that it even includes the whole field of symbolic hermeneutics which is designated by the word *ta'wil*. It is a process of eclipsing the apparent (the *zahir*), in order that what has been hidden may appear (the *batin*); ultimately, it brings about the appearance of the soul, she who is the Stranger, the "Easterner," concealed behind the "Western" disguise of the common human condition. This also instructs us in the secret of the "Eastern Quest." The Elect who are called to participate in this quest are presently situated in an intermediate place between East and West. Where, then, will they turn for the strength to undertake this quest? They will find it by plunging into the very source of that Life which is in the shadows bordering the "pole," that is to say, at the ideal limit where spiritual Form enters into matter, and therefore at the very origin of our world.[7]

The "West" is the totality of being and beings which are made of some sort of matter. The "Extreme West" is the world of non-being, of pure virtuality, perceived as the warm sea covered by Shadows, which King Alexander arrived at in his quest for the source of Life. There is also the "Terrestrial West" where emigrant Forms, exiled in Matter, engage in harsh combats. And there is the "Heavenly West," which includes the whole system of the Spheres, whose subtle and diaphanous matter is in a state quite different from that of the "Terrestrial West." The spiritual migrant who succeeds in leaving all of these Western realms arrives at the threshold of the East, and thereby at

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 183, sqq. p. 173.

that of "Eastern" philosophy. Inasmuch as the voyager rises towards this East, he encounters the genius of the soul, as well as those of the Terrestrial Angels, the Heavenly Souls (which move the Spheres), the Cherubic Archangels or Intelligences, and finally, the King, withdrawn in his absolute solitude, of a beauty which is veiled by his very beauty, which is in all beauties....The initiatory interview concludes with these words spoken by Hayy ibn Yaqzan to the visionary: "Now, if you wish, follow me: come with me unto Him."

The Story of the Birds is the response to this invitation. It is well to read this while bearing in mind the symbols of Plato's *Phaedrus:* "When the soul is perfect and fully winged, she flies lightly upward, soars in the heights, and governs the entire world." These are the souls of Gods, or privileged souls which resemble them, carried by their aspiration to the threshold of another world, beyond the physical cosmos. Other souls are unable to sustain the effort of contemplation; in their striving to rise upward, they bump and crash into each other, wearing out and breaking their wings.

The feeling-tone of the Avicennian story of the Bird has the dominant theme of the fall and redemption of the soul, upon a path where Neo-Platonists and gnostics have always found common ground. In this story, the figure who spoke with Hayy ibn Yaqzan in the preceding narrative prefaces his account with a moving prologue, from which I shall cite only a few lines:[8] "Is there none among my brothers who will lend an ear, so that I may confide something of my sadness? Perhaps he would share my burden as a brother." Then follows a deploring lament whose terms still have a piercing relevancy today, culminating

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 215–222, pp. 203–209.

in a series of pathos-filled exhortations: "Brothers in Truth! Retreat within yourselves, just as the hedgehog retreats, showing its hidden being only in its solitude, and hiding its apparent being. As God is my witness! It is your hidden being which must appear, whereas it is your apparent being which must disappear." (This turns out to be the very task of the mystical voyage, initiated at the beginning of *The Story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan* by the science of physiognomy.) "Brothers in Truth! Shed your skin as does the serpent. Tread your path like the ant, whose steps no one hears....Imbibe poison, so as to stay alive. Love death, so as to remain among the living. Stay always in flight, and do not choose the nest which is apparent, for it is in the nest that birds are captured....Be as the salamander, which allows the fire to envelop it with ease and confidence. Be as the bats, which never fly by day." There could hardly be a clearer call than this towards the esoteric.

Then ensues the narrative itself, beginning with a recalling of the fall of the soul into "Western" captivity. "Know, O Brothers in Truth! that a group of hunters went out into the desert. They spread out their nets, set out the bait, and hid themselves in the bushes. And I — I was one of the birds in that flock....We felt no anxiety....Suddenly we fell into the nets...Every movement we made only caused our bonds to draw more tightly around us, and worsen our situation."

The captive then tells how he succumbed to forgetfulness; of how he awoke into awareness of his misery; of the ruse which brought about his deliverance; and how he was helped by the companionship of his fellows. Finally, in spite of a remnant bond which impeded his foot, "I stood up outside of the cage, and took flight with them." They arrived at the summit of the first mountain, from where they could see eight other peaks. This is the entire "Heavenly," or sidereal West, described in

The Story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan, which must be passed over in an ascent from heaven to heaven, recapitulating the *Mi'raj* of the Prophet. They encounter enchanting places, and beings of awesome beauty and gentleness. However, they must each time tear themselves away from these. They know that they will only be safe when they have flown over the highest summit which is lost in the clouds, and arrived at the Royal City. Finally, they find themselves in an enclosure whose vastness is indescribable. A curtain is lifted before them, unveiling a lighted room so immense that the previous enclosure seems confining by comparison. Ultimately, they attain the Holy of Holies, the oratory of the King, like unto no other. Their hearts are dazzled by its beauty, and they are so overcome that they are unable to express their laments. Then the mystic King addresses them: "None can undo the knots which still bind your feet, other than those who tied them. Therefore, I shall send a Messenger unto them, who shall command them to remove the bonds from you. Now go forth, happy and satisfied."

This might remind us of the declaration from Parsifal: "There is only one arm with the power: the wound can only be closed by the Lance which opened it." Our story ends with this: "Now behold: we are on the way, *walking in the company of the Messenger of the King.*" These last words contain an allusion to the meaning and secret of the voyage which attains the spiritual "Extreme East." Both Avicenna's Bird and Suhrawardi's Exile are but passing "travellers" in the celestial realms; they will have to return to the life of appearances in this world. But now everything is changed. Because the visionary has answered Hayy ibn Yaqzan's invitation in the affirmative, following him all the way to the city of the mystical King, he will no longer have to walk alone, with only the dreary company of his philosophical system, and perhaps a foretaste of his awakening.

Henceforth he walks in the company of the Messenger, the Angel of both Knowledge and Revelation. Everything that philosophy could teach him as theory of Knowledge and enlightenment through Intelligence, has now become a soul-event, a companionship with the Angel. Henceforth he walks imperturbably on this path to the Royal City, this time one of no return.

There have been several expansions of Avicenna's theme of the Bird. Ghazali's was chronologically the first of these.[9] Whatever its own qualities, it is overshadowed by the great twelfth-century mystical epic by Fariduddin 'Attar, entitled *The Language of the Birds (Mantiq al-Tayr)*. 'Attar is one of the greatest Persian mystical poets, who also wrote several other mystical epics, all of them masterpieces of Persian literature.[10] As with Avicenna's version, we find ourselves among the birds in their flight. Here, the feminine messenger who urges the captives to escape is the hoopoe, Solomon's bird. Then comes the reference to the seven valleys which mark the degrees of ascension. In this account, these are the mystical valleys of searching, desire, knowledge, independence, unity, swoon, and nakedness. Just as the ninth heaven had to be crossed before glimpsing the City of the King, in Attar's version these valleys must be traversed before one discovers the palace of *Simorgh*, which is the end of the voyage of the Birds.

Simorgh is the name of a mysterious bird who appeared as early as the Avesta, the holy Zoroastrian scripture, in the form of *Saena meregha*. In Persian literature, it appears in both the

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 226–228; 2nd edition, pp. 212 (written in Arabic by Abu Hamid Ghazali and translated into Persian by his brother, Ahmad Ghazali).

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 228–235, 2nd edition, pp. 214–220; *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, pp. 395 sqq; and 'Attar, *Le Livre de l'Epreuve*, translated by I. de Gastines, Paris, Fayard, 1981.

heroic and in the mystic epics.[11] Taking advantage of a pun which occurs with the form of the feminine name *Simorgh,* which can be decomposed as *si-morgh,* meaning "thirty birds," 'Attar found a way to suggest the state of identity-in-difference and difference-in-identity. This theme par excellence of speculative mysticism was also evoked by Haydar Amoli, as have just seen, in his culmination of the fourth spiritual voyage.

Here, we shall confine our study to the final episode of the poem, wherein the mystical glory of the Birds' voyage is fulfilled — it is perhaps one of the most consummate achievements in all of Persian mystical literature. The Birds have departed by the thousands; travelling for many years, crossing summits and chasms, they have spent almost all their lives in this voyage. However, out of these thousands, there are only a small number left who listened to the hoopoe's warning so as to arrive at the sublime goal. The vast majority disappear, some of them submerged in the Ocean, others stuck on high summits, and still others baked to a crisp by the harsh sun, devoured by ferocious beasts, or simply exhausted by fatigue in the desert. Even more sadly, some of them kill each other, or stop in a group at some place, drawn into vain pleasures there, and finally die after having forgotten the object of their quest. In sum, out of the thousands of birds who originally filled the universe, only thirty (*si* in Persian) are left. And even they have been exhausted, broken, their souls flattened and their hearts broken.

The pilgrims are put to a terrible trial in an episode just before the last, making it seem as if their long voyage has been for nothing. The response that they receive from the King's her-

[11] *Avicenne...* p. 229; 2nd edition, p. 215; *En Islam iranien...,* vol. II; *L'Archange empourpré,* Paris, Fayard, 1976; and in the article "De l'épopée héroïque à l'épopée mystique" in *Face de Dieu et face de l'homme,* Paris, Flammarion, 1983.

ald is less than welcoming. Who are they? Where are they from? What use are they? "O bewildered flock! You, who bear the stains of your heart's blood, like the rose — whether you had ever existed in the universe or not, the King still exists eternally." Had they come to complain? All the birds are then presented with a piece of writing, which must be read thoroughly. This writing contains the most beautiful esoteric interpretation of the story of Joseph being sold by his brothers. They learn that each of them (each of us) has at some point sold his Joseph, his Heavenly, Eternal Self. And now, at the end of this long voyage, they claim to want to be reunited with it.

But the inner upheaval produced by this indictment serves as a liberating shock. This is the Reunion which so many mystics have tried to describe. In a final episode which is one of the great moments of world mystical literature, 'Attar describes this exaltation of self-recognition through an Other in whom one recognizes oneself, as if in a mirror. "At this moment, in the reflection of their own faces, the *si-morgh* (thirty birds) saw the face of the eternal *Simorgh*. As they looked, there was no doubt: this was indeed Simorgh, yet this Simorgh was also the *si-morgh*. Then they were overwhelmed with vertigo. They saw themselves as thirty birds, yet Simorgh was also exactly thirty birds. Whenever they looked at Simorgh, it was indeed she who was there, yet when they looked at themselves, they were still *si-morgh*. And when they looked simultaneously at both aspects, Simorgh and *si-morgh* were one and the same reality. There were two Simorghs, yet there was only one; one, and yet more than one. (This recalls the end of the fourth voyage according to Haydar Amoli.) "In all the universe, none had ever heard of such a thing. All of them fell into trance, and remained in a state of meditation beyond meditation."

They did not even need to use language to inquire of Simorgh

as to the meaning of this paradox. Their very state of meditation was in itself an inquiry, and this answer came to them: "This sun-like majesty of mine is a *mirror.* Whoever comes before it sees all of himself: body and soul, soul and body, he sees himself whole. Since you came here as *si-morgh,* you appeared as *si* (thirty) in this mirror. Whether you had been forty or fifty, or a multitude, the veil would also have lifted before you, and you would have looked and seen yourselves as you are! [...] As for me, I am far more than *si-morgh,* for I am the essential and eternal Simorgh. Therefore, lose yourselves in me, so that you may find yourselves in me. [...] And the shadow lost itself in the sun. Peace!"[12]

What each of the Birds encountered at the end of their long and painful voyage was the revelation of the mystery of their own Self, their celestial counterpart. 'Attar's symbol of Simorgh represents what Meister Eckhart expressed as "The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me." We began by pointing out that the fulfillment of "speculative" mysticism is the state where the inner being discovers itself as the very mirror *(speculum)* of divinity. It is the same divinity that 'Attar's epic presents as mirror. In effect, there is a reciprocity of contemplator/contemplated and vice-versa. It is just as much Simorgh who contemplates herself in the *si-morgh's* contemplation of her. The mirror proclaims that the divine Being is never an object, but the active subject of all knowledge of it, as well as of every experience in which it is felt. This is what must be discovered in order for teachings to become soul-events, and this is the voyage.

[12] 'Attar *Mantiq al-Tayr,* verses 4205–4280.

The Theme Of The Spiritual Voyage In Suhrawardi

As we noted earlier, this same theme of the spiritual voyage recurs in the work of Suhrawardi (died 1191, C.E), who was known as the *Sheikh al-Ishraq*. The greatest of the Persian Platonists, he revived the theosophy of the Sages of ancient Persia in an Islamic context. By this repatriation of the Hellenized Magi into Islamic Iran, he saw himself as fulfilling the project of "Eastern" philosophy, (in the metaphysical sense of the adjective) which Avicenna had not been able to complete. This "Eastern" finality can also be seen as the mystical fulfillment of the heroic epic of ancient Iran.

As with Avicenna, Suhrawardi's work itself contains voluminous theoretical writings alongside mystical narratives. In these, the dual theme of the voyage and the messenger plays an essential role, for it is here that theoretical contemplation becomes life-experience, dramatic excursions into one's inmost soul. However, the difference in tone of the narratives of Avicenna and Suhrawardi reflects the difference between these two masters.

From Suhrawardi's accounts, I have selected two narratives which happily correspond to the two moments of Avicenna's *The Story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and *The Story of the Birds* (it was Suhrawardi himself who translated the latter work from Arabic into Persian). The first moment is the invitation to the voyage, and the description of the demands of its course; the second moment is the actual setting out, the course of events during the voyage, and its outcome. The two Suhrawardian accounts are entitled *The Story of the Crimson Archangel ('Aql-e sorkh)*, and *The Story of the Western Exile (al-ghorbat al-gharbiya)*. I shall not give too long a version of these stories

here, since I have published full translations with commentaries elsewhere.[13]

The messenger who inspires the title of *The Story of the Crimson Archangel* appears at the beginning of the narrative. He is none other than Gabriel — identified, as we have already seen, as the Angel of Knowledge and Revelation, as the Holy Spirit referred to in the Qur'an, and also as the agency of Intelligence of the philosophers. It is also the Angel we shall meet again upon the mystical Mount Sinai, at the end of the voyage which is undertaken in order to break free from "Western" exile. Suhrawardi's identification of this figure also bears traces an interpretation of Platonic Ideas in terms of Zoroastrian angelology. Thus he is the Angel of humanity — the form through which the inaccessible God, the *Deus absconditus,* is revealed to humankind, in order to bring the message which calls us to our own self-recognition.

This story also opens with an account of the fall of the soul into captivity in this world, in the cosmic crypt. At the moment when the visionary succeeds in evading the surveillance of his jailers (like Avicenna's retreat to his personal Estate), he sees a visitor approaching from a distance. It is a being of youthful beauty and dazzling, red-glowing splendor. The being explains this color to the visionary by evoking the crimson of the dawn and evening twilight. Before dawn and after sunset: these are moments of in-between, where one side looks towards the brightness of day, and the other side towards the darkness of night. Also like the rising of the moon, this is the place of the messenger, the Angel of humanity, between the celestial realm and the world of becoming. Elsewhere, Suhrawardi has written

[13] *En Islam iranien....* vol. II; and *L'Archange empourpré.*

a lengthy development of the symbolism of the two wings of Gabriel, Angel of humanity: one wing is of pure light, yet the other is a glowing red, for it is mixed with the shadows of this world. Like Hayy ibn Yaqzan coming from the heavenly Jerusalem, the Angel here reveals that he comes from the other side of the cosmic mountain of Qaf, "the same mountain which was once your own home." The very idea of the return home thus is rooted in the depths of pre-existence. As Suhrawardi says, you cannot invite someone to "return" unless he has been there before. This is also the Johannine idea explicitly stated in Christian philosophy: none can return to heaven save those who have descended from there.

The voyage to which the visionary is invited by the Angel is precisely this return, this re-ascent to one's original home. The road there must be described in advance, for it is difficult and dangerous. In this account we also find descriptions of lofty, seemingly inaccessible mountain peaks. The disciple suggests digging a tunnel. The angel answers: "He who possesses Skill can cross them in one instant, without having to dig a tunnel. This makes use of a virtue similar to that of balsam. If you expose the palm of your hand to the sun long enough for it to become *burning* hot, and then pour the balsam, drop by drop, into the hollow of your hand, it will pass all the way through to the other side of your hand, because of its natural virtue. In the same way, if you activate this natural virtue in yourself, it will enable you to pass through these mountains in an instant." The symbolism here is clear.

There follows a long initiatory interview, one of whose essential passages is the mystical interpretation of two episodes from the epic *Shah-Nameh*. Here again, we meet the figure of Simorgh, and we see the heroic epic fulfilled as mystical epic. Finally, the initiation leads to the discovery of the source of

Life, into which one must plunge, so as to be immune to the blow of Death. This source is in the Shadows. "You are in the Shadows yourself," the Angel says, "yet you know it not. When he who takes this road can see himself as being in the Shadows, he will by then have understood that he previously walked only in the Night, and that he had never looked upon the clarity of Day. This is the first step (the setting out) of the true pilgrim." To plunge into the source of Life hidden in the Shadows, and to emerge from this source, is to attain that Skill "which will make you like the drop of balsam which you distill in the palm of your hand by holding it directly up to the sun, so that it passes through your hand." Then the Angel invokes the figure of Khidr (Khizr, Khadir), the mysterious prophetic guide of Moses, whose presence is always associated with the source of Life. With a supreme challenge, which is also a supreme invitation, he tells his disciple, "If you are Khidr, then you, too, can pass through the mountain of *Qaf* with no difficulty." It is this mystical transition which Suhrawardi develops in the course of *The Story of the Western Exile.*[14]

It seems to me that there are two special features which place this narrative in context. The first one is the short preface in which Suhrawardi situates himself with respect to Avicenna: "When I encountered *The Story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan,* I found that in spite of its admirable spiritual phrases and profound suggestions, it was lacking in illumination regarding the supreme experience of the Great Tremor (*al-tammat al-kubra, Qur'an* 79:34)...Now, this is the Secret which is the basis of the spiritual stations of Sufis and others who possess visionary intuition. But there is no mention of this at all in Ibn Sina's story,

[14] *Ibid.;* and *Ibid.,* p. 288 sqq.

until the end of the book, where it is said: 'Among human beings, there are some Solitary ones who emigrate unto Him.' And so I desired to tell something of this myself, in the form of this *Story of the Western Exile,* dedicated to some of our noble brothers." Thus Suhrawardi's *Western* exile, and *Eastern* philosophy, are consistent symbols whose contrast conveys his meaning perfectly.

It is this very contrast which immediately reveals the second characteristic of Suhrawardi's story. This is that several of its episodes correspond point by point to those of the famous story in the Acts of Thomas (chapters 108–113), which is known as the "Hymn of the Pearl."[15] This is the story of a young prince sent by his parents from the East, his homeland, symbolized as the country of the Parthians, to the West, symbolized as Egypt, in order to attain the unique pearl (gnosis). The youth leaves the East, removes his garment of light, and arrives in the West, in Egypt. He is solitary, an unknown Stranger. He wears the same garment as the Egyptians, so as not to be suspected. He is given food to eat, which erases his memory, so that he forgets that he is the "son of a king." But it comes to pass that he receives a message, sent by his father, his mother, the Queen of the East, and his brother (his divine Subaltern), and signed by all the Parthian nobles as well. The young prince finally remembers his royal origins, and the quest of the pearl, for which he had been sent to Egypt. He makes away with it, leaving behind his impure garment, and takes to the road towards the East. When he arrives at its border, he dresses again in his proper raiment.

[15] *En Islam iranien....* vol. II, pp. 308 sqq.; *Avicenne...* p. 182; (172 2nd ed.); and *Corps spirituel et terre céleste,* Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1979, p. 126. [The Acts of Thomas are a Gnostic Christian scripture rejected by the Church of Rome, which influenced Persian Manicheism.]

the Robe of Light, which is one of the most beautiful gnostic symbols of the heavenly Self.

Suhrawardi's *Story of the Western Exile* begins with the fall into captivity. The narrator has fallen in the city of Qayrawan, "the city whose people are oppressors" (*Qur'an* 4:77). He is tossed into the shadows; yet from there, he can discern a high castle, fortified by many towers — this is the mountain of Qaf, and the system of the nine Heavens, which must be traversed. Then, on a full-moon night, the hoopoe (Solomon's bird) brings him a message, corresponding to that received by the young Parthian prince. It is from his father, and says: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful. We languish in missing you, yet you have forgotten us. We call you, yet you never set forth. We send you signs, yet you do not understand....If you want to be free, delay no longer your resolve to set forth on the voyage." And the message goes on to explain the itinerary he must follow, with the vicissitudes to be expected during the course of the voyage.

This itinerary corresponds to the classical pattern of cosmology of philosophers, yet this is no lesson in cosmology. The stages of the ascension leading out of the cosmic crypt are described in tumultuous images; these transfigure the succession of cosmological and cosmographical degrees into symbols occuring in Qur'anic verses. The visionary hero becomes himself the hero who *acts out* all of these Qur'anic verses. This is a good illustration of how a hermeneutic, by transfiguring the material from a revealed text into symbols, becomes itself a voyage of the soul; here, the *exegesis* of the text is itself the *exodus* of the soul from the world of exile.

The voyage culminates at the Source of Life, at the foot of a high mountain which we learn is Sinai — but a visionary, mystical Sinai which is not to be found in geography. Henceforth,

he is free of the cosmic crypt. The voyager climbs the mountain, and finds himself in the presence of a magnificent being of light and splendor. He knows that his own spiritual being emanates from this being, whom he greets as his "Father."

Thus it is through angelology that the denouement of this voyage occurs. From other works by Suhrawardi, especially his *Book of the Temples of Light,* we know that in the lower ranks of the celestial hierarchy of Intelligences, there is an Angel from whom our souls emanate, who is in relationship to us as parent to children. In fact, this is an emanation of the Angel of Humanity, the heavenly *Anthropos* of all types of gnosis, known as Gabriel and the Holy Spirit in the Qur'an, and whom philosophers have equated with the agency of Intelligence. This is the Messenger, the one whom the pilgrim meets with again at the end of his voyage. The message was thus a call to the heavenly Self towards reunion with this same heavenly Self. In this identity is revealed the secret of the Hermetic notion of the "perfect Nature" as personal Angel, which plays such a major role in Suhrawardi's thought.

At the summit of Mount Sinai, where the Angel dwells, the visionary is shown other Sinais, which stretch out endlessly. These are the hierarchical Intelligences, one of whom is immediately superior to this Angel, just as he is to his own recently reunited "spiritual child." And all of these hierarchical Intelligences (familiar to any Neo-Platonist) together have a still greater superior, a supreme Ancestor, a Being who has neither peer nor ancestor. The beauty, majesty, and light of this Being can only be known by us through the succession of its theophanies. Thus all theophany is here seen as an *angelophany* in itself, where the personal link is forged between the Figure manifested, and the person to whom it is manifested. It is through

this personal link, and through it only, that there can be any meaning to the words, "My God."

We find this teaching explicitly formulated in an Ismaili treatise, where the disciple asks the master: "Will you not show me *my* God?" To which the master replies: "Do you know of anyone who can show yourself to yourself?" In Suhrawardi's tale of the Exile, the pilgrim learns from the Angel on Sinai that each of the hierarchical Intelligences is in the same relation to its emanations as the Angel to the pilgrim. In this same Ismaili treatise, the disciple insists, "But what is beyond *my* God? I want to join those who attain to the highest." The answer comes: "Beyond *your* God, there is the one who is to him as he is to you. Only one Unique for each Unique, and so on and on, all the way to the threshold of the One in which all the Uniques are contained."[16]

The Avicennian story of the Bird reaches a climax with this confident affirmation: "Henceforth, we are on the way, walking in the company of the Messenger of the King." Though Suhrawardi's version may seem to culminate on a more pessimistic note, with its necessity of returning temporarily to the Western prison of Qayrawan, this pessimism is greatly attenuated by the promise given to the pilgrim, that from now on he may return to the mystical Sinai whenever he wishes. He may do this until he is able to commit himself to the path of no return, led by the Angel from Sinai to Sinai, always ascending.

At this point, I feel that these three masters of Irano-Islamic gnosis — Avicenna, 'Attar, and Suhrawardi — have sufficiently clarified the theme of the voyage and the messenger for us, so that we can begin to conclude our investigation, especially

[16] *En Islam iranien....* vol. II, pp. 133 sqq.

since our time here is limited. Therefore we can only mention in passing the theme of the voyage to a mysterious Green Island, the dwelling of the Hidden Imam. Likewise for *The Story of the White Cloud,*[17] which tells of a penetration into the spiritual world of the *Malakut,* undertaken under the personal guidance of the Imam. This is an experiential illustration of the space-time conditions peculiar to the imaginal realm . And this brings us to our concluding topic of how the theme of the spiritual voyage is related to the metaphysics of the imaginal world.

The Theme of the Spiritual Voyage and the Metaphysics of the Imaginal World

There are three points to be considered here.

The first, which I especially want to emphasize, is a danger of misunderstanding to which these visionary narratives are exposed. We have seen them as accounts of that privileged moment when a theoretical teaching becomes a real event. But this reality is one of events which take place in "their place," which is the visionary world of the *Malakut.* This is why I have never used the word "myth," and have still less use for the notion of "de-mythologizing." Unfortunately, contemporary fashions of interpretation, with their shallow rationalism, inevitably give way to a tendency towards a sort of "de-mythologizing." They reduce these visionary narratives to allegories, as if a discovery of their hidden meaning consisted in a regression to the level of conceptual evidence, where esoteric doctrine as such is supposed to be situated.

This error amounts to a pure and simple nullification of the

[17] *Ibid.,* vol. IV, "Le récit du Nuage blanc," pp. 150 sqq.; and "Le voyage à l'île Verte en la mer Blanche," pp. 346 sqq.

spiritual voyage, and a condescending attitude towards the Messenger.[18] But if the teaching is indeed the esoteric meaning of the narrative, it is only so by virtue of its becoming a real event of the soul. The inner meaning of the stories of Avicenna and Suhrawardi does not consist in the discovery of some doctrine of cosmology or astronomy. We must take into account three hermeneutical levels, which we shall denote as A, B, and C. These are known as the three levels of certainty in Islamic gnosticism.

Level A is theoretical certainty *('ilm al-yaqin)*. An example of this is hearing from someone else of fire, and what it is like. Level B is the certainty of eyewitness testimony *('ayn al-yaqin);* this is to see fire oneself, and understand its nature personally. Level C is that of certainty which is personally and gnostically lived and realized *(haqq al-yaqin)*. Here, one becomes the fire, or is consumed by the fire. The transition from A to B, and then to C, is what happens in the spiritual voyage. But the attainment of level C does not at all involve some return back to the theoretical doctrine of level A. Instead, it consists of taking everything at level A, and raising it to level B. This is the *anagoge,* the anagogical way, or ascension. "If you *are* Khidr, then you can cross these mountains with no difficulty," declares the Angel to the disciple at the end of the *Story of the Crimson Archangel.* "It is I who am the hero of this tale," declares the author at the end of the *Story of the Western Exile.*

Hence we are dealing with neither myth nor allegory, and still less with a story in the ordinary sense of the word. What we have here is an example of what is technically known as *hikayat,* a term which contains both the idea of a recital and that of

[18] *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 190–200.

an imitation. It is a mystical recital in which narrator, narrated deed, and hero of the narrative are all one. This is also the secret of the passage from heroic epic to mystical epic in Persian literature.[19] It is the *Eastern* finality, in Suhrawardi's sense of the adjective. The spiritual voyage is the actualization of this finality, and the esoteric meaning of the story is precisely this voyage.

But now we must clarify these last two points, in order to conclude: what is this world, this *East,* to which the hero of the visionary recital gains access? And finally, where is it, and what are the conditions for entering it?

Our second point deals with the first of these two questions. The dramatic setting of such visionary accounts requires a postulate which has both gnostic and metaphysical aspects. It was this postulate which, a number of years ago, drove me to the Latin dictionary in search of a new word for this world of visionary narratives, which I feel is now familiar enough to many readers. We cannot avoid the fact that in current usage, which we might call exoteric, the word *imaginary* is equivalent to "unreal," because "reality" has now been reduced to empirical reality. But an imaginal body, or *jism-i mithali,* is not an imaginary body! I have already condemned this disastrous hermeneutic, which degrades visionary accounts into something unreal, by reducing them to allegory or fantasy.

Hence I needed to find a good equivalent for the Arabic term *'alm al-mithal.* It would have to designate a world, a mode of being and knowledge which are at the level of the Imagination,

[19] *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 182 sqq., and index under *hikayat;* also see *Face de Dieu et face de l'homme.*

yet which are far from unreal, since they have a perfect right to be considered as real, as part of a reality *sui generis*. The term *mundus imaginalis* is the exact equivalent of the Arabic *'alm al-mithal*. This world plays an essential role in Suhrawardi's cosmological and gnostic system. On several occasions, he declares that it is this world which gives meaning and reality to the visions of prophets, the experiences of mystics, and to events of Resurrection and eschatology. When this world disappears from our philosophy, we become incapable of understanding any of these things. Everything thus becomes myth or allegory, in the sense of something unreal. Suhrawardi says that this intermediate world between sense-perception and intellective intuition is a world which retains all the spatial extension and color of the physical world, but in a spiritual state. We thereby avoid the whole dilemma of having to decide between thought and extension.

This was completed by a further step, which was taken in the seventeenth century by another leading light of the *Ishraqiyun*, Mullah Sadra Shirazi. Having shown the entire metaphysics of the Imagination which is implied by the autonomy of the *mundus imaginalis*, he postulated that the Imagination is itself a spiritual faculty, independent of the physical organism. It therefore survives it, somewhat like a subtle envelope of the soul. It is what enables a human being to penetrate the other world "on an equal footing," so to speak, at the moment of death, just as one has previously penetrated there, more or less, during certain dreamlike states in life. This leads to an extraordinary development of the Image, with a full recognition of its *noetic* function.

But here we must beware. This valuation of the Image has nothing to do with those of television, film, or other images which remain tenaciously bound to sense-perception. The spir-

ituality of the visionary Image is the very reverse of what is currently described (correctly or not) as an "image-oriented" culture. For that matter, might it not be this same degradation of the Image to which our spiritual traditions have secretly succumbed? As if a fundamental aim of all asceticism were the destruction of the Image? The visionary narratives we are considering, like others of their kind, warn us against such "inward iconoclasm." If we instead follow the anagogical way, we arrive at the level where the Image, far from losing touch with sense-perception, actually anticipates all empirical perception, and takes its rightful place with respect to it. It is our inner paradise; yet it can also become our hell. Ultimately, we can find many correspondences between *Ishraqi* philosophy and the *philosophia sagax* of Paracelsus, for the *'alm al-mithal* is the same as what all Western gnostics have designated with the beautiful symbol of the *caro spiritualis.*

The third and final point is the question as to what conditions are necessary in order to gain access to this world, and *where* it is located. Whether *Ishraqiyun* or gnostic Shiites and Ismailis, all these authors have stated repeatedly that one only enters there by being reborn, undergoing a "spiritual birth" *(wiladat ruhaniya).* As so often with Islamic gnostics, there is a tangible Johannine quality here. Granting this condition, where is this imaginal world of the *East* to be found? What is its place, and how does one go there? What sort of topography ultimately applies to such a voyage — one to which we are invited not only by the messenger of Avicenna's and Suhrawardi's accounts, but also by the one who appears at the beginning of the *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz?*

Suhrawardi's uniquely pertinent answer to this question is to coin a Persian phrase: Na-koja-abad, which is literally the

"country of not-where."[20] Nowhere, certainly, but in the sense of not being in any physical place, not determined by any coordinates of perceptible space. However, it is till a "country" *(abad),* one where visionary events and voyages "take place." It is a spiritual space which also has its distances and far reaches, but these are traversed not through motion, but according to a greater or lesser intensity of desire. It is true that these authors use a description based on Ptolemy's *Imago Mundi,* when they say that the imaginal world begins at the convex surface of the Ninth Sphere. But this only underscores the point they want us to understand: that it begins at the limit where one goes out of the cosmic crypt. And once out of it, what sort of country, or place is to be found? What is it like to enter into *Na-koja-abad?* It is precisely the crossing of this limit, where the pilgrim no longer finds himself *in* the place, but *is himself the place.* To leave it (to pass beyond the Ninth Sphere) is to no longer be in the world, but to henceforth have the world in oneself, to be oneself the place where the world is. This is the *imaginal space,* the space where the active Imagination freely manifests its visions and its epics.

The circle, as it were, where they are manifested, is essentially one whose center is also its circumference — this is the property specific to spiritual circles, as distinct from material circles. This is a representation derived directly from the work of Plotinus, and known in Arabic and in Latin under the name of the *Theology Attributed to Aristotle.* It has inspired an Iranian Shiite gnostic master such as Qazi Sa'id Qommi (died 1691), as well as a German master of Christian mystical theosophy, such as Valentin Weigel (died 1588). They are alike in their valua-

[20] *En Islam iranien....* vol. IV, index under Na-koja-abad.

tions of this specific idea of the spiritual circle whose center and circumference coincide.

Qazi Sa'id Qommi develops this idea admirably, with his analysis of the spiritual structure of the Temple of the Kaaba as being both the center of the world and its envelope.[21] Weigel, on the other hand, analyses the distinction between *occupying* a place and *filling* it, in his great treatise, *On the Place of the World (Vom Ort der Welt)*. The difference is that a spiritual substance fills a place, without occupying it.[22] In this sense, a number of spiritual substances can fill the same place, because spirit comprehends and envelops its own space; it is itself its own place. It is impossible for a spirit to be confined in a body. The world has never been able to enclose even a single Angel. On the contrary, spirit envelops all bodies. To be one's own place, without being in the place — this is what is meant by being both the center and the circumference. This is the meaning of *Na-koja-abad,* and why it is the "place" of these visionary narratives.

Already in the *Theology Attributed to Aristotle,* contemplated and commented by such as Avicenna, Qazi Sa'id Qommi, or Weigel, it is written that each of these spiritual entities "dwells in the Heaven beyond that of the stars (i.e., *Na-koja-abad*), and is *in the totality of the Sphere of its Heaven,* yet nevertheless has a determinate place (and still being its own place) which is distinct from that of its companion — this is what distinguishes it from embodied things under the astronomical heaven." In a

[21] See "La configuration du temple de la Ka'ba," reprinted in *Temple et contemplation,* Paris, Flammarion, 1981.

[22] See B. Gorceix, *La Mystique de Valentin Weigel (1533–1588) et les origines de la théosophie allemande,* Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1972, pp. 153–158 and 204 sqq.

medieval treatise attributed to Hermes, the *Book of the 24 Masters (Liber XXIV Magistrorum),* we also find a clear statement of the dual thesis that "God is a Sphere with as many circumferences as there are points," and "God is an infinite Sphere whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere."[23] This saying has had tremendous reverberations in the history of philosophy, though its link with our subject here has been little noticed. There is no better expression than this of the paradoxical identity between the center and the circle. It is because of this identity that the Angel in the *Story of the Crimson Archangel* tells the visionary: "However long and far you travel, you will always arrive again at your point of departure." This is what is implied by "being in the totality of the Sphere of one's Heaven."

Of course we will have to return to this subject at another time or place. For now, what is important to grasp from all this, is how the idea of the spiritual voyage both presupposes and imposes this metamorphosis of one's concept of space. This transformation is in keeping with an entire metaphysics of the imaginal. It is also the metamorphosis of the knowing Subject, which we mentioned at the beginning. And it is why we are told that this metamorphosis depends upon a rebirth, a spiritual birth. At the completion of the voyage, we shall be questioned: "Where is the newborn one?" This was also the question asked by the three Magian Kings, arriving at Jerusalem near the end of their journey towards the star (Matthew 2:2). Any answer to this would have to arise from a way of seeing which Paracelsus called *astronomia caelestis,* the astronomy which looks for signs in the inner Sky. As to this culminating question of the

[23] See Paul Kraus, *Jâbir ibn Hayyâm,* vol. II: "Jabir et la science grecque," p. 149, n. 5.

voyage, "Where is he who has been born again?" — the answer, as confirmed by Meister Eckhart and by Tauler, as well as by 'Attar, Suhrawardi, and Qommi, can only be: "No other place than in himself."